

LITERATURE REVIEW:  
STAN BRAKHAGE AND THE INSTITUTIONS OF  
THE AVANT-GARDE

By

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LITERATURE REVIEW:  
STAN BRAKHAGE AND THE INSTITUTIONS OF  
THE AVANT-GARDE

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Abstract: This paper maps the social and institutional support utilized by Stan Brakhage in his avant-garde filmmaking career. In some ways typical of the avant-garde's trajectory from the underground to the university, Brakhage managed a prolific output of films despite the economic hardships he faced. Although previous studies offer substantial textual analysis of Brakhage's poetic filmmaking style, this project seeks to better account for the ways Brakhage's personality and his artistic persona informed the crucial relationships he depended on throughout his life. As such, this work identifies areas where scholars can add further historical context to existing studies from P. Adams Sitney, David E. James, and Scott MacDonald.

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## Literature Review

Although academic journal articles and scholarly surveys of avant-garde filmmaking reference Stan Brakhage frequently, few studies have focused on Brakhage's life and career either narrowly or exhaustively. Brakhage published his prolific theoretical writings in *Metaphors on Vision*, *Film at Wit's End*, and numerous essays later included in edited anthologies: *Telling Time: Essays of Visionary Filmmaker*, *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*, and *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings 1964 to 1980*. Along with Brakhage's film theory texts, personal correspondences and other documents contained the *Brakhage Collection* record some of the biographical and historical context that scholars use to bolster their analyses of Brakhage's films. Scholarly close-readings of Brakhage's films, for the most part, come from P. Adams Sitney's seminal text in the study of avant-garde filmmaking, *Visionary Film*, and his subsequent reiterations of its thesis. Though far less frequently referenced by scholars than Sitney, Gerald Barrett's *Stan Brakhage: A Guide to References and Resources: Reference Publication in Film*, briefly synthesizes each of Brakhage's films up to 1981. Barrett gives a biographical timeline of known or alleged events in Brakhage's life and provides every known

source on Brakhage at the time of Barret's meticulous research in 1983. Along with Sitney and Barrett's comprehensive coverage, scholars Scott MacDonald, Paul Arthur, David E. James, Marie Nesthus, and Ara Osterweil read individual films or groups of films, usually, for the ways they represent a shift in aesthetics from Brakhage's prior work.<sup>1</sup> James edited an anthology of essays about Brakhage, *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker*, and several other historical studies of the political and social dynamics within avant-garde art worlds. These studies by James, focused on subjects proximate to Brakhage, provide contextual information about Brakhage's relationships with people like Jonas Mekas and Amos Vogel, and the contours of the ideological schisms that formed in the process of institutionalizing avant-garde cinema. Scholars have studied the role of institutions in shaping, promoting, and disseminating work by and about avant-garde filmmakers. Scott MacDonald and David James document and analyze countercultural institutions like Cinema 16, Grove Press, NY Filmmakers' Co-Operative, and *Film Culture*, alongside traditional institutions like Universities, federal and private art foundations, and museums. A study on Cinema 16, by MacDonald, and an analysis of avant-garde sexual politics, by Ara Osterweil, although not narrowly focused on Brakhage, each use historical and biographical details to inform interpretations of Brakhage's aesthetic shifts. Further historical and critical context provided by Michael Zryd, Sally Banes, Maria Pramaggiore, and primary texts found in the *Brakhage Collection*, are supplements to existing studies on Brakhage.

The following review begins with the literature on Brakhage's early life and the start of his filmmaking career leading up to his employment at CU-Boulder. Jane Wodening's biography and Brakhage's correspondences suggest how Brakhage's personality and personal relationships frequently enabled and vitalized his work. As a supplement to the biography of Brakhage's adult life, studies of

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<sup>1</sup> Camper, Fred. "Brakhage's Contradictions." *Chicago Review* 47/48 (2001): 69-96.  
Barr, William R. "Brakhage: Artistic Development in Two Childbirth Films." *Film Quarterly* Vol. 29, no. 3 (1976): 30 – 34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211710> (accessed December 7, 2017).

avant-garde sociality and institutionalization elucidate the historical situation in which Brakhage's work emerged. These supplemental sources demonstrate how Brakhage received access to exhibition and distribution from Cinema 16, Grove Press, NY Filmmakers' Co-Op, and other outlets, and received publicity from independent publishers like *Film Culture*. Concluding this survey is a consideration of the role of institutions in Brakhage's career—the *Brakhage Collection* documents the financial uncertainty that motivated Brakhage to seek institutional support in the form of grants and eventually employment at a University. In the 1970s, Brakhage taught at the Art Institute of Chicago and, in 1981, received a full-time teaching position at the University of Colorado-Boulder. Letters of recommendation written by peers for Brakhage's hiring, along with personal letters discussing Brakhage's thoughts on teaching, suggest further evidence of peer support, social networking, and the necessity of institutional support to subsist as an avant-garde filmmaker materially. With the exception of Carolee Schneemann, the majority of details obtained in letters from the *Brakhage Collection* represent key relationships in Brakhage's career which have not been given sufficient attention by scholarly literature. The evidence obtained in these correspondences is used to suggest gaps in secondary literature on Brakhage that can be addressed by future scholarship.

### **Brakhage's Early Life and Filmmaking**

Located in the basement of the Norlin Library on the University of Colorado-Boulder campus, the *James Stanley Brakhage Collection* (*Brakhage Collection*) offers a view for scholars into Brakhage's life in ways that were previously unavailable, even to those who knew Brakhage personally.<sup>2</sup> Head archivist Bradley Arnold oversees the collection, and his remarkable knowledge and expert organization of the contents is an invaluable resource to any researcher who ventures there. The scope of the archive is extensive—it is a collection of Newspaper clippings, theoretical essays, screening notes and brochures, University administration and curricular documents, and a selection of letters from over a half-century

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<sup>2</sup> *Brakhage Collection* accessed March 2015.

period. The collection of letters, in particular, provides a diverse set of communications to and from Brakhage—quotidian updates about children and living conditions, disputes over films' selling prices, philosophical treatises, and financial records. Some of Brakhage's correspondence, referenced in scholarly work on the filmmaker, no longer exists due to loss and alleged destruction by Brakhage and Wodening to rid themselves of the content.<sup>3</sup> In what is likely the most inflammatory case of an excluded letter, as revealed in Carolee Schneemann's response to it, Brakhage told Schneemann that she should not have terminated her pregnancy.<sup>4</sup> A more innocuous example of an excluded letter is from Cecille Starr, who worked for the Lincoln Center and was a prominent advocate who helped Brakhage receive paid invitations to present his films in New York. In Brakhage's response to the excluded letter from Starr, Brakhage thanks her for sharing thoughts about teaching because he writes, his "12 years at Art Inst. Chi. haven't produced much meaningful feedback."<sup>5</sup> The uncontroversial nature of this letter shows that most of the exclusions within this archive are not part of an effort to sanitize his legacy. The preservation of Brakhage's documents reflects the diligent role Brakhage's first wife, Jane Wodening, had in giving future generations access to Brakhage's life in ways that can only improve future scholarship on Brakhage and his work.

Wodening's decade's long preservation of these letters before they came to be housed in their current location is a testament to her directly shaping the texts by which scholars might study Brakhage. Scholars have not yet given critical attention to Wodening's role as an author of Brakhage's legacy, though Brakhage openly expressed his view that the collaborative project of marriage and raising a family together was inseparable from the art that resulted from it. Brakhage made his views on collaboration explicit in a letter to Cecille Starr, where Brakhage wrote,

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<sup>3</sup> I was told this by Bradley Arnold, archivist at the *Brakhage Collection* in Boulder, CO. March 20, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Kristine Stiles, *Correspondence Course, An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle*

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Cecille Starr from Stan Brakhage (JSB COLL Bx 34 Fd 9) April 16, 1981.



“Collaboration enriches a work, providing there is a singular strong maker thru [*sic*]  
whom all input passes definitively. I’ve always considered the majority of my making a  
collaboration between Jane and I and/or the children and I , etc. ‘Blue Moses’ is certainly  
a collaboration between actor Bob Benson and I, all portraits similarly a collaboration...  
or, rather, something more like a dance. But the music (the Muse) does definitely come  
thru [*sic*] me—whether I want it to or not.”<sup>6</sup>

In this letter to Starr, Brakhage’s explains that his relationships with Wodening, his children, and close-friends inform his artistic practice. Filmmaking for Brakhage was a collaborative effort that nevertheless depended on one creator to ultimately give birth. This aspect of what Brakhage meant when he scratched "by Brakhage" onto his films is relatively commonly understood because Brakhage repeated his position throughout his life.<sup>7</sup> However, scholars have not sufficiently considered Wodening's role as the archivist who shaped and preserved Brakhage as a historical text. Brakhage's writings and correspondences suggest that his complicated relationships with other artists and advocates, along with his family, influenced his films both thematically and materially. To outline some of these relationships, first, a brief analysis of Brakhage's biography reveals patterns of conflict that recur in his professional relationships. Despite Brakhage’s cyclical feuds with friends and peers, this social network was vital in securing necessary institutional support for Brakhage’s career.

The archive contains letters written by Wodening that reveal her role in the Brakhage family filmmaking business, which ranged broadly from managing payment records and censoring letters that might upset Brakhage to collecting and preserving these documents for history. In one such

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<sup>6</sup> Stan Brakhage to Cecille Starr (JSB COLL Bx 34 Fd 9) Updated, around 1980. All of the original punctuation and capitalization is maintained from the original in order to preserve Brakhage’s idiosyncratic writing style.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Brakhage’s appearance on *Screening Room* (1980), where Robert Gardner interviewed Brakhage for an independent Boston TV series on independent and avant-garde filmmakers.

correspondence with Barney Rosset, head of Grove Press, Wodening accounts for all the payments received for film rental fees between 1973 and 1976, and states a balance owed of \$3,133.99. Wodening asks Rosset that Grove Press no longer distribute Brakhage films despite their contract. Wodening noted that she would not change her position unless Grove should "change [their film] department, make it well-organized, well-documented, well-advertised, what-ever [*sic*] is needed to bring it back to life and reasonableness," in which case, she writes, "[she and Brakhage] would support it and praise it."<sup>8</sup> This letter evinces Wodening's direct role in the Brakhage family business and gives specificity to the Brakhages' collaborative activities. With the better understanding of Wodening's role that the *Brakhage Collection* allows, scholars can begin to appreciate the ways that Brakhage and Wodening's marriage allowed the filmmaker to limit his attention to his laborious films rather than the finances they required. Brakhage's financial troubles were a lifelong theme and constant source of turmoil. Letters within the *Brakhage Collection* evince the Brakhage's desperate financial situations, including a particularly stressful audit by the IRS in the 1980s. Brakhage's wrote a letter to Barney Rosset in which Brakhage described his belief that the audit was not an audit but a "criminal investigation," launched by the suspicion that Brakhage was a pornographic filmmaker who, they inferred, probably made more money than he reported to the IRS.<sup>9</sup> Examples like these suggest that, while Brakhage felt considerable stress and even some paranoia about his financial situation, Wodening was a mutual partner in handling the burdens of the family business.

The *Brakhage Collection* provides valuable biographical context, especially considering how frequently Brakhage's films were explicitly autobiographical. Brakhage's childhood, as Marjorie Keller argues in her book, *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage*, was a source of pain and ultimately great artistic inspiration for Brakhage, who was orphaned, chronically ill,

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Brakhage to Barney Rosset (JSB COLL B47 F1) December 23, 1976

<sup>9</sup> Stan Brakhage to Barney Rosset (JSB COLL B47 F1) June 23, 1974

and raised in precarious conditions by his adoptive mother. Keller published her book in 1986, well before the opening of the *Brakhage Collection*, but her personal relationship with Brakhage informs her familiarity with Brakhage's films and the theoretical principles which motivated them. Despite this familiarity, Keller expresses a hope that someday a biographer may be able to verify the details of Brakhage's difficult early life in order to better understand how his own childhood influenced the recurrent themes of childhood in his films. Brakhage's project was an attempt to recreate, re-experience, and fully appreciate childhood, which he expresses in a frequently cited passage from *Metaphors on Vision*, as a quest to discover "How many colors [there are] in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'."<sup>10</sup> The answer to Keller's 1986 request that a Brakhage biography might better contextualize the influence his childhood had on his films came nearly three decades later when, in 2015, Wodening published *Brakhage's Childhood*.

The first and only book-length biography on Brakhage, *Brakhage's Childhood* is a story of Brakhage's orphaning by his birth mother and the subsequent itinerant and tumultuous foster and adoptive households he endured. Wodening does not call this an autobiography, and although the fluidity of the prose is recognizably different from that of Brakhage in virtually any of his writing, Wodening's first-person narrator and the grandiose, sometimes egotistic bravado of the protagonist mimic Brakhage's voice convincingly.<sup>11</sup> Wodening explains in the Preface that this style made sense because it reflected the way that Brakhage told her the stories in a series of intense sessions, sometimes a month or more apart so that Brakhage could recover from the exertion required by such recollections (xv). After their traumatic divorce in 1986, following long-festered animosities between them that culminated in Brakhage's infidelity and other abuses, Wodening spent several years reflecting on her marriage with Brakhage and these stories he told her. The author makes clear that the traumas that culminated in their divorce affected

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<sup>10</sup> Keller, 187. Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Pipolo, "Afterword," in *Brakhage's Childhood*. 296.

her view of Brakhage. She recalls wondering what character trait explained Brakhage's sudden blossoming at around thirteen years old. According to his telling of the story, Brakhage went through a transformation that Wodening describes as a "leap from being a sickly, bullied and bespectacled child to being Head Boy in his class, loved and admired by everyone in school" (xvi). Brakhage's narrative did not explain—psychologically or otherwise—such a shift, and Wodening feared that it was "impossible to follow in the story [she] had been writing" (xvi). Wodening's eventual conclusion, with several years distance, is that Brakhage "had the self-centered arrogance of a lonely and spoiled child who would rage to get his way" (xvi). The sometimes violent rage Wodening recalls seeing during her marriage to Brakhage is the explanatory "thread of power" that Wodening surmised Brakhage had omitted in telling the story; this rage provided Brakhage a means of self-expression beginning in his early teens and throughout the rest of his life (xvi). Brakhage explained his outbursts as "Holy Rages," where, overcome by "the Muse," he found quasi-divine inspiration.<sup>12</sup> Wodening's book is the only comprehensive account of Brakhage's childhood, which raises a question about how much this narrative of Brakhage's early-life can serve as a historical record.

The Afterword to Wodening's book, by psychoanalyst Tony Pipolo, considers the credibility of these stories as a record of the past. Brakhage's stories are mediated not only by Wodening but also their necessary dependence on memory. Considering the untrustworthiness of memory, Pipolo uses documents in the *Stan Brakhage Collection* to analyze Brakhage's writings and makes inferences about Brakhage's motivations for any embellishments, exclusions, or fabrications. Rather than taking these stories as accurate accounts of the past, Pipolo suggests that Brakhage's "recollections... are, unconsciously, about deflecting, confessing to, or providing defensive rationalizations for, troublesome feelings around circumstances in the present" (309). Pipolo is therefore looking for Brakhage's embellishments and elisions for signs of his unconscious desire to craft an origin-story that could better justify his tumultuous

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Wodening. *Brakhage's Childhood*. (xvii).

“circumstances in the present,” at a time when his marriage was dissolving and his friendships strained as ever.<sup>13</sup> While Pipolo’s psychoanalysis relies on textual support from a vast body of references, it bears more investigation as to whether these pathologizing biographical details can productively influence scholarly appraisals of Brakhage’s films.

Pipolo psychoanalyses Brakhage's relationship with his unstable and emotionally abusive mother and concludes that Brakhage was a pathological narcissist who showed a pattern of abusive behavior towards those closest to him. Whether or not Pipolo's clinical diagnosis is necessary or productive, Brakhage's relationships throughout his life echo many of the characteristic traits Pipolo identifies in Brakhage's experiences as a child. Brakhage's correspondences confirm his habit of insulting friends and fellow artists, including Jonas Mekas, Carolee Schneemann, Peter Kubelka, P. Adams Sitney, Guy Davenport, and Paul Sharits. The pattern in these relationships begins with passionate, affectionate declarations of friendship followed by, sooner or later, a sudden falling out instantiated by one of Brakhage's emotional outbursts.

The relationship between Schneemann and Brakhage has been the subject of scholarly inquiry because their conflicts animate the tensions between Brakhage and Feminism during the mid-1970s.<sup>14</sup> Kristine Stile’s book, *Correspondence Course, An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle*, published many of the letters communicating the grievances between the two. In Brakhage’s view, many of his conflicts with friends like Schneemann stemmed from what he repeatedly defended in his letters as his commitment to speaking the truth, which sometimes meant harshly criticizing peers whose work was contrary to Brakhage's sense of "Art."<sup>15</sup> One such letter from Brakhage to Carolee Schneemann, in 1975, describes the defensive posture Brakhage assumed anytime someone accused him of cruelty:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Kristine Stiles. *Correspondence Course, An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle*.

<sup>15</sup> See Stan Brakhage letter to Carolee Schneemann. August 11, 1975. Box 31, Folder 16, The Stan Brakhage Collection 1933-2003, Norlin Library Archives, the University of Colorado at Boulder.

"All that I otherwise-than-family support is that which I do fully recognize as Art– that poor tired old word... Moreover, last night Jane commented that I had ‘sacrificed friends again and again for what I believe,’ etc.”<sup>16</sup> Brakhage’s habit, as evinced in this letter, is to rhetorically frame his critiques of other artists as being motivated by his keen sense of integrity, which required him to reject any artistic practice that he does not “fully recognize as Art.”<sup>17</sup> This example shows how Brakhage felt the loneliness of habitually losing friends was a penalty for his commitment to artistic integrity. This type of defense worked to position Brakhage as a victim whose free speech and artistic integrity was under attack by whoever had taken offense.<sup>18</sup>

Though Brakhage’s friendships suffered because of it, his self-assured bravado and charismatic energy were noticeable at an early age. The historical moment of Brakhage’s childhood saw unprecedented opportunities for children to gain recognition and minor acclaim. After the hardships faced in the Second World War, Americans increasingly turned their attention towards recognizing and celebrating the bright futures of the nation’s talented youths. Newspapers and radio broadcasts created contests to award children for their talents in a variety of arts like writing and music. In 1947, the *Denver Post* published a brief story mentioning then fourteen-year-old Stan Brakhage for winning "Champ of the Week" for his solo performance in a church choir, earning him a "\$25 war bond."<sup>19</sup> A talented singer, Brakhage showed virtuosic abilities and advanced to lead soloist.<sup>20</sup> This newspaper clipping in the *Brakhage Collection* is preserved in a well-organized box of news clippings dated from 1947 to 1959. The *Brakhage Collection* contains excerpts from Brakhage’s mentions in articles from *Rocky Mountain News*, *Denver Post*, and South Denver High School’s newspaper, *The Confederate*, which provide details

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Underline in original.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Underline in original.

<sup>18</sup> See also Tony Pipolo, “Afterword.” *Brakhage’s Childhood*.

<sup>19</sup> Box 120, Folder 16. The Stan Brakhage Collection 1933-2003, Norlin Library Archives, the University of Colorado at Boulder.

<sup>20</sup> Jane (Brakhage) Wodening, *Brakhage’s Childhood*.

about Brakhage's involvement in musical and theatrical clubs both in high school and during his brief stay at Dartmouth. Brakhage's talent as a writer earned him an award during his senior year of high school, documented by the *Denver Post* in 1951, in what Brakhage reported was the first writing contest he ever entered.<sup>21</sup>

After high school, Brakhage spent the early 1950s in New York and San Francisco, where he met and impressed influential members of the emerging avant-garde scene. In 1954, Brakhage lived in San Francisco, "in the basement of poet Robert Duncan and painter Jess Collins," while he attended classes at the San Francisco Art Institute.<sup>22</sup> While in San Francisco, Brakhage encountered Jackson Pollack, John Cage, Kenneth Anger, and several other influential artists. A year later, Brakhage moved to New York, where he was initially homeless.<sup>23</sup> In a retrospective occasioned by Brakhage's death in 2003, Larry Jordan claims that in 1954 or 1955, Brakhage "sought out" Maya Deren, who allowed him to sleep on a couch in her Greenwich Village studio apartment.<sup>24</sup> Brakhage's introduction to Deren involved acquiring her address and appearing at her apartment, where Brakhage used the charismatic personality he honed in his high school theater training to integrate himself into the central enclave of avant-garde filmmakers and critics of the time. The friendships, influences, and professional relationships Brakhage formed here during his early twenties— with Marie Menken, Willard Maas, Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, John Cage, Jonas Mekas, Joseph Cornell, P. Adams Sitney, Amos Vogel, and others— served as a vital network of peers that Brakhage would utilize throughout his career.

In addition to his new friends in New York and San Francisco, Brakhage's relationships with South Denver High School were instrumental in starting his filmmaking career. In 1952, Brakhage made his first film, *Interim*, with help from James Tenney and Walter Newcomb. Newcomb and Tenney, along

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<sup>21</sup> Box 120, Fd 16.

<sup>22</sup> Larry Jordan, "My Travels With Stan." *Millennium Film Journal*, 41 (2003): 76.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

with Larry Jordan, Yvonne Fair, Robert Benson, and others, were members of Brakhage's high school cohort who referred to themselves as Gadflies.<sup>25</sup> Larry Jordan later described this group as "intellectual rebels," whose shared interest in art formed a bond that lasted for several years after high school.<sup>26</sup> Brakhage's films from this period, as a result, are primarily addressed to a small audience of friends with whom Brakhage collaborated. The introspective films Brakhage made with his Gadfly companions—*Interim* (1952), *Unglassed Windows Cast a Terrible Reflection* (1953), *Desistfilm* (1954), *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954), *Reflections on Black* (1955), *Flesh of Morning* (1956), *Nightcats* (1956)—which Sitney calls psychodramas, were unlike his later films in their use of scripts, actors, and sound. In these early films, Brakhage explores the deep uncertainty he shared with his peer group as they entered into adulthood and contemplated their future careers, many of them as artists.

Screenings of Brakhage's first films took place at the Experimental Cinema Group in Boulder; the group watched each other's films or the films they helped to make. Outside of Boulder, Brakhage's travels through San Francisco and New York established a network of distribution and exhibition outlets for his earliest films.<sup>27</sup> In 1957, Brakhage married Jane Collum (now Wodening), and Brakhage's interest in capturing the psychosexual dynamics of their relationship caused a thematic and aesthetic shift in his films. Whereas in his earliest collaborations, high school friend Walter Newcomb frequently played the protagonist, Brakhage's post-marriage films—*Anticipation of the Night* (1958), *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959), and *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959)—are introspective and explicitly autobiographical. In these films from the latter part of the Fifties, Brakhage dispenses with actors and fixes his camera on himself, his new family, and their newly settled home in the mountains outside of Nederland, Colorado. From his secluded cabin in the mountains, Brakhage stayed connected to the happenings of the New York art scene with regular correspondences to his friends there. In a 1957 letter

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<sup>25</sup> Larry Jordan, "My Travels With Stan." *Millennium Film Journal*, 41 (2003): 76.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Brakhage Collection*



to Amos Vogel, the founder of Cinema 16, Brakhage declares his intent to travel to New York at least once per year, claiming that contact with New York “is essential for [him] as an artist. [Brakhage] must always be aware of what's going on, film-wise. Moreover, New York is the only place where about everything goes on, or is about to.”<sup>28</sup> Brakhage then requests that Vogel “keep [Brakhage] posted on new films [he] should be seeing and what's happening.”<sup>29</sup> Brakhage also inquires whether he may “rent certain films from time to time without paying the full devastating price if [he] give a word of honor that they will only be view [*sic*] by [him]?”<sup>30</sup> At the time, Vogel distributed and exhibited films as a part of his Cinema 16 film society, which explains why Brakhage would expect Vogel could offer a discount. This relationship continued to be one of the most important for Brakhage’s access to institutional support, as Vogel eventually oversaw Grove Press, which took over the role of distributing Cinema 16’s film collection.

Brakhage had a valuable network of peer support that enabled the creation of specific films. Perhaps the most obvious example of a group of films that relied on Brakhage's network was his Pittsburgh Trilogy: *Eyes*, *Deus Ex*, and *The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes* (1970-71). Scott Macdonald and Paul Arthur point to Brakhage’s visit to a hospital, a morgue, and his ride-along with police documented in these films as instances where Brakhage reinvented his own aesthetics in what Arthur describes as a foray into cinéma vérité.<sup>31</sup> Brakhage’s access to these three institutions depended heavily on his connection to Sally Dixon of the Carnegie Museum of Art, which Brakhage later thanked her for in a letter.<sup>32</sup> A few years later, Dixon even sent a letter to Edward Sabol, the founder of NFL

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<sup>28</sup> Stan Brakhage letter to Amos Vogel. *Stan Brakhage Collection*. Box 35, Folder 15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Paul Arthur. “Qualities of Light: Stan Brakhage and the Continuing Pursuit of Vision.” *Film Comment* 31, no. 5 (1995):68. See also Marie Nesthus, “The “document” Correspondence of Stan Brakhage.” *Chicago Review* 47-48, no. 1-4 (2002): 133-54

<sup>32</sup> Stan Brakhage to Sally Dixon. JSB COLL Box 11 Fd 17 Page 4. October 27, 1970. "I must have written your name a dozen times this morning, giving credit to your helpin [*sic*] making ‘eyes’."

Films, requesting his help to get permission from the Pittsburgh Steelers for Brakhage to make a documentary about the team.<sup>33</sup> Dixon's letter explained to Sabol that Brakhage's film would be a "Personal artistic expression," not a "commercial-type documentary," and that the film "would be shown only at museums, universities, and art film societies throughout the United States and Europe with the same aesthetic philosophy that supports the display of a painting or a sculpture."<sup>34</sup> These personal favors suggest Sally Dixon's willingness to help Brakhage with the limited resources available to her, and this exchange is indicative of the ways that advocates like Sally Dixon provided Brakhage opportunities to explore new themes outside of his home environment.

By 1963, journals like *Film Culture*, along with film societies like Cinema 16, created a critical conversation about avant-garde aesthetics that placed Stan Brakhage as among the central figures. Along with Mekas, essays from P. Adams Sitney and Parker Tyler laud Brakhage, who they frequently begin describing as a filmmaking poet.<sup>35</sup> In 1955, Jonas Mekas, published, "The Experimental Film in America," in his magazine *Film Culture*, which was the first New York magazine to mention Stan Brakhage (then referred to as Stanley) as a filmmaker. The essay became notorious because of Mekas' claims about a group of filmmakers guilty of perpetuating a "Conspiracy of Homosexuality," which he perceived in "Kenneth Anger's, [Sidney] Peterson's, or [Stan] Brakhage's sadistic or masochistic scenes."<sup>36</sup> Revisiting his essay in a 1970 footnote to the *Film Culture Reader*, Mekas described his earlier views as a "Saint-Augustine-before-the-conversion piece," reflecting the extent to which his position changed in the subsequent fifteen years.<sup>37</sup> The controversial claims of the essay were widely criticized,

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<sup>33</sup> Sally Dixon to Edward Sabol. JSB COLL Bx 11 Fd 18. September 13, 1972

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Parker Tyler, "A Preface to the Problems of Experimental Film," (1958): 42-51. Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," (1962): 87-107. P. Adams Sitney, "Imagism in Four Avant-Garde films," (1963-64): 187-200. P. Adams Sitney, "Interview with Stan Brakhage," (1963): 201-229.

<sup>36</sup> *Film Culture Reader*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26.

resulting in the full circulation of the text among those invested in avant-garde films. This wide circulation evinces the notoriety Brakhage attained only four years after graduating high school, as Mekas lists Brakhage alongside notable early 1950s avant-gardists Gregory Markopoulos, Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, and James Broughton.<sup>38</sup>

Brakhage's publicity is only notable relative to other avant-gardists and was, in total, not substantial or even sufficient. The extreme poverty Brakhage faced, attested to by many letters describing limited food rations and receipts of modest incomes, deserves to be mentioned in any account of the occasional financial support Brakhage did receive.<sup>39</sup> Economic support from the Avon Foundation, AFI, Carnegie Institute, and eventually the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Colorado-Boulder, are even more significant considering Brakhage's economic hardships. As the above example of Sally Dixon shows, Brakhage's relationships with these institutions were valuable for more than just the occasional financial rewards. Not only did these networks provide Brakhage access to resources, but Brakhage also called upon these advocates when he needed job referrals for teaching positions.<sup>40</sup> After years of campaigning on his behalf by friends, advocates, and the founder of the CU-Boulder Film Studies program, Virgil Grillo, the University of Colorado-Boulder hired Brakhage to teach in 1981. In the previous decade, Brakhage traveled by train to Chicago to teach a course on film history. In these lectures, Brakhage rehearsed the biographical studies of Dziga Vertov, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and other auteurs, that he later published in *Film Biographies* (1977).

Despite his utilization of an extensive professional network, Brakhage's correspondences with fellow artists who received teaching jobs and grants reveal his conflicted views about avant-garde artists relying on institutions for support. In a letter to fellow filmmaker and teacher at SUNY-Buffalo, Paul Sharits, Brakhage recounts a hostile encounter between the two and describes their disagreements about

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> *Brakhage Collection*

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Cecille Star from Stan Brakhage. April 16, 1981 (JSB COLL Bx 34 Fd 9)

whether artists should teach art.<sup>41</sup> Brakhage taught courses on, among other topics, the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, in addition to teaching film history. Brakhage did not, however, teach others how to make films, which he considered to be a dangerous practice for an artist. Describing the potential risks faced by artists trying to teach, Brakhage wrote, "the energies which can be used creatively should never be spent academically—at least not by artists."<sup>42</sup> Contradicting the ample evidence suggesting Brakhage was desperately seeking employment at CU-Boulder in the 1970s, even teaching night-classes part-time as a part of the University's Continuing Education curriculum,<sup>43</sup> Brakhage claims in the letter to Sharits that he had been "blessed inasmuch as [he had] never been able to attain a steady teaching job, certainly not an academic position or tenure, etc."<sup>44</sup> Considering the reportedly eighteen-hour train rides Brakhage endured to teach in Chicago, it is somewhat insincere for Brakhage to suggest that he did not desire a more stable teaching position.<sup>45</sup> This letter to Sharits suggests some bitterness on Brakhage's part that Sharits had gotten Academic employment. As Michael Zryd's essay on academism and the avant-garde elaborates, this debate between Sharits and Brakhage centers around the contradictory impulses of artists to maintain strict independence while also depending on institutions for material support.<sup>46</sup> Brakhage's skepticism about institutional support extended beyond Universities to include the AFI, NEA, and other foundations whose support Brakhage feared was "infinitely MORE dangerous to use at this time when they are, as they now are, pretending to be our "friends"? They will, I think, use a very few of the creative film-makers as TOKENS whereby they ignore everything else and defeat the young."<sup>47</sup> Despite benefiting from the support of these foundations, Brakhage could sense the risks of ceding independence to powerful institutions.

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<sup>41</sup> Stan Brakhage to Paul Sharits (JSB COLL B9 F13) February 20, 1974

<sup>42</sup> Stan Brakhage to Paul Sharits (JSB COLL B9 F13) February 20, 1974

<sup>43</sup> Jane Brakhage to Don Yannacito, (JSB COLL B37 F9) August 1973

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Stan Brakhage to Cecille Starr. April 16, 1981. (JSB COLL Bx 34 Fd 9)

<sup>46</sup> Zryd, Michael. "The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance." *Cinema Journal* 45:2 (2006): 17 – 42. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/195304>. (accessed July 12, 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

The interpersonal relationships, critical attention, access to distribution networks and institutional support Brakhage attained in the first two decades of his career attest to the influence of the individuals with whom Brakhage ingratiated himself. While Amos Vogel was perhaps the most vital connection to exhibition, distribution, and marketing of Brakhage's films, scholarly attention Brakhage received began with P. Adams Sitney. A regular attendee at Cinema 16 screenings, P. Adams Sitney, was integral to the formation of a critical, scholarly conversation about avant-garde films. Sitney was a founding member of the Anthology Film Archives, a regular attendee of Marie Menken and Maya Deren's private screenings, and the first to write a scholarly textbook on American avant-garde film. Initially published in 1974 and now in its third edition, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, was the first in-depth study of America avant-garde film. In the following section, the literature about the New York Underground is surveyed in order to introduce P. Adams Sitney's scholarly contributions. Studies by James, MacDonald, and Arthur are used to augment the above biographical literature on Brakhage to better historicize the political, aesthetic, and interpersonal dynamics within the post-War, American avant-garde community.

### **Avant-Garde Scholarship and Institutionalization**

In New York City following World War II, a counter-cultural underground developed in which political subversives found creative expression and community through avant-garde art. The New York Underground included authors, painters, poets, theatrical artists, and others committed to developing radical, anti-bourgeois aesthetics. Scholars and artists have variously described this loosely formed contingent as underground, avant-garde, experimental, and poetic modes of art. Greenwich Village artists' sought to supplant dominant cultural values and create social arraignments in their ideological image.<sup>48</sup> The radical, anti-bourgeois ideals of avant-gardists were amenable to the core values of liberal arts programs that sought to recognize and encourage diverse voices.

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<sup>48</sup> Sally Banes. *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Performance art, according to Sally Banes, provided an exceptionally viable entry point for avant-garde filmmakers seeking employment at Universities. Banes's performance art methodology considers the performances required by avant-garde artists who travel from town to town, university to university, presenting their films, and the ways these performative gestures functioned as paratexts to the films. The performance art lens provides room to consider avant-gardists' themes of embodiment and the body of the artist, sometimes by depicting the body itself or indirectly through physical, bodily manipulations of the filmstrip.<sup>49</sup> Similar scholarship in the 1990s explored broader notions of a "text" to include not just films and other visual arts but also the physical, embodied experience of the artist.<sup>50</sup> Banes explains how avant-garde artists' public personas contributed to their inclusion into institutions of higher-learning by enhancing the image of the University, as a safe-haven for intellectual freedom and creativity. While Banes indicates that at least some of the universities reaching out to avant-garde artists may have been self-serving, the opportunities for artists were nonetheless crucial. With this study from Banes, Brakhage's ability to self-promote through his speaking tours, correspondences, and academic publications are considered a part of his work as a filmmaker.

Like Sally Banes, media scholar Maria Pramaggiore considers broader definitions of a 'text,' or the object of critical study, to encompass the material and corporeal conditions of authors and artists.<sup>51</sup> Rather than closely analyzing films for their psychological and philosophical expressions, as Sitney and others mostly do, Pramaggiore uses information gleaned from correspondences, interviews, and

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<sup>49</sup> For the feminist, sexual politics approach to embodiment in art, see Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. Also see Bruce Elder's formal analyses of avant-garde cinema, *A Body of Vision: Representations of the Body in Recent Film and Poetry*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997. For journal articles, see Cranny-Francis, Anne. "Touching Film: The Embodied Practice and Politics of Film Viewing and Filmmaking." *The Senses and Society* 4:2 (2009): 163 – 178. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/174589309X425111>. (accessed July 12, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> See Thomas F. Cohen. "After the New American Cinema: Shirley Clarke's Video Work as Performance and Document." *Journal of Film and Video* 64.1 – 2 (2012): 57 – 64.

Tess Takahashi. "Experimental Screens in the 1960s and 1970s: The Site of Community." *Cinema Journal* 51 (2012): 162-164.

Edmund B. Ligan. "The Alchemical Marriage of Art, Performance, and Spirituality." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 31.1 (2009): 38 – 43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30131087> (accessed July 12, 2017).

<sup>51</sup> See also Nesthus, Marie. "The 'Document' Correspondence of Stan Brakhage." *Chicago Review* 47/48 (2001): 133-156.

filmmakers' public performances to interpret informal discourses surrounding avant-garde artists. While presenting their films to audiences, filmmakers produce autobiographical paratexts that scholars have suggested inform the historical reception of their films. Several studies on Maya Deren show how her claims of being a Vodoun priestess and her quintessentially bohemian wardrobe contributed to her relatively well-known public persona, in part because critics used her physical appearance in their responses to Deren's work.<sup>52</sup> In *Cinema Journal*, an article by Maria Pramaggiore uses Maya Deren as a case study in how the extratextually constructed persona of an avant-garde filmmaker contributes to the commodification of the filmmaker in ways that resemble stardom. The argument highlights the avant-garde's creation of quasi-celebrity personas that were the result of overt marketing practices. The author's perspective sheds light on the ways avant-garde artists marketed an image similarly to their counterparts in commercial cinema. Pramaggiore uses Deren's public lectures, usually held during screenings of her films, after which the critics Pramaggiore cites make references to Deren's public persona by mentioning her unique appearance in their discussion of her films. The reception of Deren's work as art and the small amounts of acclaim she received owed, in part, to the construction of her well-rounded artist persona—painter, choreographer, poet, Vodoun priestess, filmmaker. Deren's persona accrued over a variety of paratextual performances. Deren's publicity caused animosity, usually spoken in secret though occasionally manifesting in the open, among filmmakers who perceived Deren's acclaim to be undue. In several characteristically sardonic and even crass letters from Willard Maas to Stan Brakhage in the 1950s, Maas expresses some disdain toward Deren for the publicity she received, referring to her as "M. Deadend."<sup>53</sup> The fractious interpersonal dynamics operating within this community of avant-garde

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<sup>52</sup> See Maria Pramaggiore, "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren." *Cinema Journal* 36 (1997): 17-40.

Other journal articles include Geller, Theresa L. "The Personal Cinema of Maya Deren: Meshes of the Afternoon and its Critical Reception in the History of the Avant-Garde." *Biography Journal* 29.1 (2006). ProQuest.

Anne Cranny-Francis. "Touching Film: The Embodied Practice and Politics of Film Viewing and Filmmaking." *The Senses and Society* 4:2 (2009): 163–178. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/174589309X425111>. (accessed July 12, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Willard Maas to Stan Brakhage (JSB COLL B22 F19) October 30, 1955. January 15, 1956. May 28, 1957.

filmmakers provide scholars ample opportunities for further inquiry into how avant-garde artists' personas framed and still frame reception of their films. Notable works by Scott Macdonald, David E. James, Michael Zryd, and Paul Arthur describe the agitations and negotiations between filmmakers, critics, advocates, and government censors in their bids to influence avant-garde filmmaking through their respective channels of power.

Before Oxford University Press published Sitney's book in 1974, several marginal publishers were instrumental in scholarship about the avant-garde. Loren Glass's book, *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-garde*, describes Grove Press' instrumental role in distributing avant-garde material. In 1969, Grove Press published Parker Tyler's *Underground Film*, among other key texts promoting avant-garde filmmakers. Barney Rosset purchased Grove Press in 1951 and eventually hired Kent Carroll to manage the Grove Film Division. Under Rosset's direction, Grove Press found its niche, first with novels that censors had deemed obscene, notably *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (Lawrence), *Tropic of Cancer* (Miller), and *Naked Lunch* (Burroughs). In 1969, Grove Press published Parker Tyler's *Underground Film*, among other vital texts promoting avant-garde filmmakers.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside underground and Left-leaning publications like *Evergreen Review*, *Village Voice*, and *Film Culture*, the film catalogs of Grove, the NY Filmmakers' Co-Op, and Canyon Cinema were another important channel for artists to not only distribute but also publicize their work, particularly to other artists. In letters to Kent Carroll at Grove Press, Brakhage's disputes about how the catalog's wording and arraignment attest to the importance of these catalogs as a source of information regarding newly released underground and avant-garde films.<sup>55</sup> In one letter, Brakhage expresses perturbation that his film, *Lovemaking* (1968), had been wrongly excluded from a Grove catalog themed around "Sexual

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<sup>54</sup> Loren Glass. *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-garde*. Post 45. 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Stan Brakhage to Kent Carroll (JSB COLL B47 F1) November 15, 1975



Expression.” Brakhage asked Carroll whether this exclusion had been influenced by “the recent Supreme Court decision on pornography—whether you have stopped advertising this film or WHAT?”<sup>56</sup> During the same time as the letter, Grove Press distributed an 8mm print of the now unavailable *Lovemaking*, which controversially depicts a scene of explicit sex between adults, juxtaposed to Brakhage’s nude children playfully bouncing on a bed. Although the film was never legally challenged as Jack Smith’s had been, Brakhage feared it would be and suspected his IRS audit in the 1980s to be a delayed punishment for his controversial film.

An essential work in the study of avant-garde sociality by David E. James, *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, maps a different kind of influence than Sitney by focusing on the formation of a community of avant-garde advocates in New York. As previously mentioned above, Brakhage benefitted from a community of advocates like Sally Dixon and Cecille Starr. Other scholarships demonstrate the integral role of Jonas Mekas and Amos Vogel in supporting avant-garde artists, Brakhage of course among them. An essay by Paul Arthur later published in his book, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*, also focuses on Mekas and the ideologies that informed his unusual and often controversial leadership.<sup>57</sup> Along with his brother, Adolfas, Jonas Mekas founded the New York underground film magazine, *Film Culture*, which in the late-50s and early-60s grew to be an influential and sympathetic publication for avant-garde projects. In addition to *Film Culture*, Mekas wrote a recurring column in *The Village Voice* called “Movie Journal,” and, in 1962, co-founded the Film-Makers' Cooperative and Filmmakers' Cinematheque along with a group of other avant-garde filmmakers. The Film-Makers' Cooperative rented and sold avant-garde films, and their catalog advertised films to a relatively broad audience. While distribution and advertising were vital for filmmakers, the Co-Op's revenue was never substantial, and the vast majority of rentals went to

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<sup>56</sup> Stan Brakhage to Kent Carroll (JSB COLL B47 F1) November 15, 1975

<sup>57</sup> Paul Arthur. “Routines of Emancipation: Jonas Mekas and Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties,” *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*. Minnesota UP; Minneapolis, 1-23.

Universities.<sup>58</sup> After the Co-Op, Mekas was a founding member of the *Anthology Film Archives*, which sought to document and collect the “essential” expressions of avant-garde film.<sup>59</sup> James uses the American political climate of the Free Speech Movement and the New Left, as well as Mekas’s immigrant experience, to historicize the radical aim of Mekas’s involvement in producing and advocating for avant-garde films.

Scholars have described the influence of Jonas Mekas in promoting avant-garde filmmakers by institutionalizing exhibition and distribution practices. Brakhage benefitted, however modestly, from his connection to Mekas and the New American Cinema Group. In a study of the ideological and organizational influences on Mekas, Brakhage, and other members, Paul Arthur identifies Mekas’s anarchic tendencies, which like James, Arthur attributes to the subversive political and aesthetic project of the New York Underground. Paul Arthur’s essay focuses on the difficulty Mekas and other revolutionary Leftists had in accepting or embracing positions of power. Both Arthur and James describe disputes between Mekas and artists who felt Mekas was acting like a dictator in his attempts to assert authority over Co-Op policy. At the same time, Mekas feuded with Amos Vogel about the lack of sufficient organization to govern the Co-Op, to which Mekas gave his often-cited response that, “The policy of NO POLICY is also a policy.”<sup>60</sup> This quote encapsulates the operative paradox underlying what Arthur describes as the need for radical political movements to nonetheless depend on “a fluid, responsive chain of command,” even though the subversive ideologies uniting the group seek an overthrow of such systems.<sup>61</sup> Access to distribution and exhibition for noncommercial films depended on independent

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Zryd. “The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance.” *Cinema Journal* 45 (2) Winter:2006.

<sup>59</sup> <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/about/about>

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight*. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

institutions, namely Cinema 16 and others, which functioned on traditionally hierarchical notions of artist and audience.

Scott MacDonald's *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society*, contains a wealth of correspondences centering on Amos Vogel and his role in the cultivation of an audience for non-commercial films.<sup>62</sup> Alongside interviews with Amos and Marcia Vogel, Cecille Starr, Jonas Mekas, and others, MacDonald published many whole letters from Vogel's personal and business correspondences, including numerous exchanges with leading artists and influential people from the avant-garde movement. MacDonald's work is invaluable as it displays a personal view of how avant-garde filmmakers relied upon networks of peers for distribution and advertising.

The relative success of Amos Vogel at generating interest in avant-garde film hinged upon his ability to draw audiences "with no particular commitment to cinematic experiment or to avant-garde film."<sup>63</sup> With roughly four thousand members, MacDonald describes the relative popularity of Cinema 16's programs as the largest audiences to "have regularly attended film programs of such diversity."<sup>64</sup> Although Vogel successfully cultivated an audience, most of whom when surveyed reported as college graduates, this audience was not as interested in Cinema 16's avant-garde programming as they were in the documentaries. Vogel's unique approach, which MacDonald describes as dialectical programming theoretically akin to the dialectic of Soviet montage, involved pairing independent documentary films alongside avant-garde films. In Vogel's survey of the audience in the Fall of 1953, "42 percent wanted Vogel to show more documentaries and fewer experimental films, and another 15 percent wanted fewer documentaries and more experimental films."<sup>65</sup> The fact that Vogel conducted these polls suggests similarities between he and commercial cinema's audience sampling. The figures Vogel collected show a

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<sup>62</sup> Scott MacDonald. *Cinema 16: Documents Toward History Of Film Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 14.

disparity between the audience's interests in the two sides of the program, but MacDonald explains that these dialectical pairings intended to "undercut whatever expectations of narrative and emotional resolution viewers had brought with them from their more conventional film experiences."<sup>66</sup> MacDonald suggests that, although audiences may not view more experimental works as a result of attending Cinema 16 screenings, Vogel's primary goal was not to create a customer-base for generating profit or advertising artists, but rather to stimulate the broader appetite for non-narrative, experimental film forms. Vogel's strategy saw consciousness-raising as the solution to the problem of audience interest rather than typically commercial concerns like entertainment.

The desire to elevate the consciousness of audiences, MacDonald instructs, was born out of Vogel's radical politics and his commitment to "create maximum thought— and perhaps action— not simply about individual films but about film itself and about the social and political implications of its conventional (or unconventional) uses" (10). Vogel's desire to confront audiences is akin to similar avant-garde and Modernist projects of the post-War era. While MacDonald mentions Eisenstein in particular, the familial lines of confrontational art extend to radical European artists like French Letterist and Brakhage associate, Maurice Lemaître. Lemaître's *Le film est déjà commencé?* (1951) included specifications for how the film must be presented using a variety of tactics meant to frustrate audiences— hours-long delays, intemperate auditoriums, paid agitators disguised as belligerent audience members— all contributed to an intentionally maddening experience meant, ultimately, to install revolutionary energy in the minds of the audience. Vogel's best-selling book, *Film as a Subversive Art*, a chronology of cinema's eradication of cultural and formal taboos, suggests Vogel's commitment to the radical reevaluation of cultural norms.<sup>67</sup>

Feuds between members of the avant-garde community frequently stemmed from tensions between the need for institutionalization and simultaneous insistence on independence. In an article

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>67</sup> Amos Vogel. 1974. *Film as a subversive art*. New York: Random House.

published in *Cinema Journal*, Michael Zryd gives a historical account of the debate engendered by avant-gardists' embrace of institutional support, particularly in the form of University teaching positions. Fred Camper and other filmmaker/critics opposed to the relationship of dependence forming between avant-garde artists and Universities argued that subversive aesthetic concerns were antithetical to these institutions and their conventions. Avant-garde filmmaking always existed in opposition to the profit-driven approach of commercial cinema, and yet filmmaking demanded access to precious resources. In a 1969 letter to A.A. Heckman, Brakhage explained the difficulties of working in the medium of film: "being a film-maker is rather more like being a gold craftsman of the middle ages than comparable to any other form of art I can think of or imagine: (a film-maker is, in fact, a silver craftsman—as that is the most expensive ingredient [*sic*] of the celluloid process)"<sup>68</sup> The inherent costs of filmmaking generated conflict for artists whose aesthetics also implicitly reject profiting from art, or as Zryd puts it, who “sabotage” the economic potential of the film with their formal treatments.<sup>69</sup> Throughout Brakhage’s lifelong correspondences, he expressed understandable frustration and disdain for the difficulty of funding his film art. As Zryd reminds, no avant-garde filmmaker in America ever subsisted by film sales and rental fees alone; the most commonly available means of employment was teaching in Universities.<sup>70</sup> To find employment, artists in the post-War era relied heavily on networks of peers with whom they communicated regularly.

Artists used personal connections to one another to form a network that they could use to, among other things, introduce themselves to other artists and well-connected members of the community. In one such letter, Ernie Gehr introduces himself to Brakhage in 1969, and expresses deep gratitude that

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<sup>68</sup> Stan Brakhage to A.A. Heckman, March 16, 1969. JSB COLL, B47 F15.

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Zryd, “The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance.” *Cinema Journal* 45 (2) Winter:2006. 21.

Brakhage's films had "pulled [him] out of the darkness of [himself]." <sup>71</sup> Gehr's only connection to Brakhage before the first letter is through his mutual associations; Gehr knew Mekas, Vogel, and other members of the New York avant-garde contingent, one of whom presumably gave Brakhage's mailing address with the understanding that he might be of assistance to Gehr. In 1978, Gehr thanks Brakhage for "contacting Bob Bell in S.F." Gehr was looking for employment, but he explains, "Other people [he] had asked during the summer said that there were no available teaching positions at S.F. State or anywhere else in S.F." <sup>72</sup> The significance of the community formed by Mekas, Vogel, and others in New York, is evident here as an upstart artist ingratiates himself to Brakhage and later reaches out to him in hopes of gaining employment.

Also emerging from within the New York Underground, the first critics to produce formal or synoptic analyses of avant-garde films served as compelling voices contributing to scholarly conversations about avant-garde cinema. As Sally Banes suggests, these academic conversations generated the momentum needed for avant-garde artists to earn enough cultural prestige for relatively conservative University administrators to perceive their work as worthy of study. William Wees provides an account of the earliest scholarship, from Sheldon Renan and then Parker Tyler in 1967 and 1969, respectively, about the filmmakers of the New York Underground. <sup>73</sup> Renan and Tyler's work tend toward prescription in their evaluative critiques, preferring forms which can be traced back to European avant-gardists like Buñuel, Cocteau, Dalí, Jean Vigo, Eisenstein, and the German expressionists. The European avant-garde had apparent influences on their American successors, who adopted the former's introspective, somnambulatory aesthetics in what P. Adams Sitney and others term the psychodrama. The

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<sup>71</sup> Ernie Gehr to Stan Brakhage, Date unknown, likely 12/69. JSB COLL B16 F18

<sup>72</sup> Ernie Gehr to Stan Brakhage, January 24, 1978. JSB COLL B16 F18

<sup>73</sup> Wees, W. C. (2009). WHATEVER HAPPENED TO UNDERGROUND FILM? *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 18(1), 94-103. Retrieved from <http://argo.library.okstate.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/211512985?accountid=4117>. See also, Sheldon Renan. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. Boston: Dutton, 1976. Parker Tyler. *Underground Film; a Critical History*. New York: Grove Press, 1970.

films of Maya Deren, as well as Brakhage's early films like *Interim* (1952), *Desistfilm* (1954), and *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1954), are projections of the artists' interior, subjective, and dream-like experiences. These early works by Renan and Tyler surveyed a small group of artists, which mostly consisted of Marie Menken, Maya Deren, James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas and Kenneth Anger. For the present research, other notable members of the Underground community include Amos Vogel and P. Adams Sitney

Every dedicated survey or significant scholarly publication written in the first several decades after the 1950s about underground or avant-garde cinema came from someone with an insider's perspective. Following Tyler's *Underground Film*, P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* introduced the most enduring and influential critical thesis in the field of avant-garde cinema. The most qualified, formally trained scholar of the group, P. Adams Sitney began associating with the New York Underground around age sixteen before attending Yale. Sitney and Vogel were not filmmakers, but, as further discussed below, the political motivations for Vogel's involvement in avant-garde cinema were more obviously radical than Sitney's traditional, scholarly contributions. Vogel's *Film as a Subversive Art*, is a catalog of films that transgress cultural and formal taboos and that Vogel argues are avant-garde cinema's greatest contribution to modern art. Considered alongside Sitney's book of the same year, 1974, the lack of scholarly pretense or analysis in Vogel's vast catalog of obscure films suggests the difference in motivation and approach between these two leading figures and authors of the avant-garde. Scholars have given less attention to Sitney's role as a member of the Underground than has been given to his scholarship on avant-garde filmmakers, most of whom were fellow members of the Underground.

Sitney's critical schema echoes Brakhage's assertions about his strongest poetic influences. Along with Michael McClure, Charles Olson, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein, Brakhage self-described affinities to Modern poets began in high school and, according to both Brakhage and Sitney, had tremendous influences on Brakhage's conception of the artistic imagination. Sitney's book also follows David E.

James's 1984 essay, "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson," in linking Brakhage's film poetics to Olsonian Romanticism. Despite Brakhage's relatively narrow list of poets, his influences were more diverse than even Sitney's Emersonian; Romanticist model entirely accounts. Drawing on everything from Pannalal Ghosh's modern-Indian flute music, the philosophy of Leibniz and Kant, and classical Greek drama, Brakhage's sensibilities reflect what Sitney calls a Romantic impulse to preserve and modernize the universal themes found in classic or traditional art.<sup>74</sup>

First-hand knowledge of the subject provides Sitney an unparalleled view from which to deploy the formal reading strategy he learned while at Yale. Unlike Parker Tyler before him, Sitney's *Visionary Film*, first published in 1974, does not limit its focus to only those films which bear immediate similarities to European avant-garde works. For Sitney, with a slightly more significant historical vantage point than Tyler, American avant-gardists' shift from psychodrama to mythopoeia, lyricism, and structuralism signaled an end to the obvious connections to formal concerns of the Surrealists and Expressionists. As a result of Sitney's more nuanced understanding of avant-garde film's American trajectory, his critical categorization of films is exceptionally functional and his influence on scholarly studies of the American avant-garde is ubiquitous. Michael Zryd discusses the frequent criticisms of Sitney's model that result, in part, from students' familiarity with the source because of its use as a textbook. Zryd cites critiques of formalism, Romanticism, and Sitney's rigid canonization of a small group of films, and Zryd rightly concludes that such criticisms often do not sufficiently acknowledge the nuanced close-readings Sitney provides, which in many cases are the most adroit textual analyses available for these rare and hard-to-access films.<sup>75</sup>

P. Adams Sitney's most recent elaboration of his well-established thesis came in his 2008 book, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. Sitney's project in the book is to

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<sup>74</sup> Stan Brakhage, (Online). "The Test of Time," Radio broadcasts, KAIR, University of Colorado. 1982, <http://www.ubu.com/sound/brakhage.html>

<sup>75</sup> Michael Zryd



map Emersonian conceptions of vision onto avant-garde filmmakers whose theoretical writings suggest some influence by the poet, whether knowingly or unknowingly. This study makes use of Sitney's training as a literary scholar at Yale, where he learned firsthand from notable literary influence theorist, Harold Bloom. Tracing the lineage of, as Bloom called it, "The Visionary Company," Sitney identifies the primacy of vision for Ralph Waldo Emerson, Gertrude Stein, and even "an avowed anti-Emersonian poet," Charles Olson.<sup>76</sup> Like a family tree, Sitney maps the lineage of influence that unites the diverse forms and themes of John Cage, Abigail Child, Ian Hugo, Hollis Frampton, and others. For this group of poets and their filmmaking predecessors, a vision has qualities of universality that language, especially in its conventional usage, fails to express.

### **Stan Brakhage and the Institutions of the Avant-Garde**

In P. Adams Sitney's seminal text, *Visionary Film*, Stan Brakhage is the apotheosis of visionary Romantic tradition in the throes of poetry's modern technological eradication. As the above historiography demonstrates, Sitney's work and the resultant efforts to trace the Romantic roots of Brakhage's films have held uneven sway over histories of the American avant-garde.<sup>77</sup> The prevalence of Romanticist readings owes, in large part, to Brakhage's own descriptions of his work as poetic filmmaking.<sup>78</sup> In Brakhage studies in particular, less coverage has been given to the advocates, friends, and institutional supports that enabled Brakhage to become a recognizable brand within the avant-garde's niche audience, as well as a crucial node of commerce in the American avant-garde. Specifically, Brakhage's itinerant lectures allowed him to distribute and exhibit films as well as provide his gravitas that had been well practiced since his competitive high-school drama career. The never-ending travel schedule of Brakhage circa 1960 and 1980 shows a geographic spread of university and community

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<sup>76</sup> P. Adams Sitney. *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson*. Oxford UP: 2008, (5).

<sup>77</sup> See for instance, David E. James. "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson." *Film Quarterly* 35:3 (1982): 35 – 43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211925>. (accessed July 12, 2017).

<sup>78</sup> Scott MacDonald. "The Filmmaker as Visionary: Excerpts from an Interview with Stan Brakhage." *Film Quarterly* 56.3 (2003): 2 – 11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2003.56.3.2> (accessed July 12, 2017).

college, as Sally Banes indicates, hinting at some shared ethos between the community of intellectuals working in the growing American university system and Brakhage. That Brakhage's performance of his artist persona has not been linked with his filmmaking practice is even more surprising considering the emphasis Sitney gives to mythopoesis in Brakhage's films. The focus on romantic individualism has had the effect, then, of obscuring the way the film avant-garde worked, which was as a community and as a set of alternative institutions. This argument is not evaluative, but rather addressed to the pragmatic and material circumstances required to produce art, especially film.

A broadened conception of the object of textual study in Brakhage's work allows for interactions with friends, family, advocates, and institutions, and the ways these relationships functioned to aid and inspire his filmmaking, both practically and theoretically. Brakhage's lack of financial success notwithstanding, he did valuable networking in his early career that enabled his lifelong, prolific output of films. Brakhage's tumultuous friendships provided emotional catalysts that he responded to in his films, although some of these relationships have not yet been given sufficient historical consideration.

### **Brakhage's Social Network**

One exception to this gap in critical coverage is Brakhage's relationship with Carolee Schneemann, which motivated several films from each filmmaker. Schneemann's relationship with Brakhage is instructive as a model for how scholars have treated Brakhage's films in relation to biographical details surrounding the films' making. When Brakhage dropped out of Dartmouth, he sought out and became a guest at the apartments of Maya Deren, Marie Menken, Willard Maas, Joseph Cornell, and also the eighteen-year-old Carolee Schneemann. Scholars frequently refer to Schneemann as a performance artist because her work combines painting, music, film and videography, and live-performance, and her troubled friendship with Brakhage is an often-mentioned historical footnote attached to her career. In a letter to Robert Haller in 1977, Carolee Schneemann addresses the tendency to understand her film *Fuses* (1967) as integrally linked to Brakhage's *Loving* (1957) and *Love Making*

(1968), saying Haller's question "invites a cat out of the bag, and for me clears an intermesh of experiences, more than 'a footnote.'" Though Haller's letter mentioning a footnote and provoking Schneemann's response is not available, that the cathexis of *Fuses* lies in its commerce with Brakhage's legend has in turn acted as a recurring historical footnote in reductive ways.<sup>79</sup> Schneemann's disagreements with Brakhage involved both Stan Brakhage's and Jane Wodening's views on reproduction and gender roles.<sup>80</sup> By all accounts, the Brakhages' marriage appeared to Schneemann as the opposite of the kind of egalitarian relationship she had with James Tenney, who introduced her to the Brakhages. Schneemann felt that Jane Wodening was excluded from certain decisions and discussions in ways that made her feel deeply distressed. During their visit to the Brakhages' cabin in 1956, Schneemann and Tenney allowed Brakhage to film them making love. Brakhage edited and released the film, *Loving* (1957), which Schneemann felt was not representative of the relationship she had with Tenney. In response, Schneemann produced *Fuses*, which she described as an act of reclaiming a part of her sexuality. Schneemann encapsulates her relationship with Brakhage and the films they each produced when she writes, "The conditions of affinity, mutual influence and response are more consistent between Stan's and my work than is normally understood."<sup>81</sup> The terms "affinity, mutual influence and response" suggest a more egalitarian conversation than cursory accounts of *Fuses* as a generic, reactionary assault on Brakhage's privileged position as a male-artist. Kristine Stiles and Ara Osterweil thoroughly document Schneemann's disagreements with Brakhage over art, marriage, and sexuality, to show the influence these disagreements had on the filmmaker's work. More scholarship is needed, however, to further investigate the extent to which Brakhage and Schneemann's disagreements and animosity affected either artist's

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<sup>79</sup> An exception comes from Scott Macdonald, "Carolee Schneemann's Autobiographical Trilogy," *Film Quarterly* 34 (1) 1980: 27-32, which makes no mention of Brakhage.

<sup>80</sup> See "Robert Haller Interviews Carolee Schneemann 30 November 1973," <http://www.ubu.com/sound/schneemann.html>

<sup>81</sup> Letter, CS to Robert Haller. 23 October 1977. Kristine Stiles. ed., *Correspondence Course, An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle*, Duke University Press: (2010).

public personae, and whether or not this had any material consequences in the form of institutional support.

A historical perspective of Schneemann's critique could identify the institutional supports available to the Romanticist literary tradition that Brakhage relied upon for his itinerate lectures and screenings at universities and community colleges.<sup>82</sup> P. Adams Sitney's 1974 report on the American avant-garde's visionary tradition already recognizes and uses the visionary terms of Romanticism that are also deployed by Brakhage in his theoretical writings and informal lectures. Sitney's hugely influential teacher, Harold Bloom, provides a terse summation of the view of romantic poetry that informs Sitney's description of Brakhage's mythopoesis: "To make a myth is to tell a story of your own invention, to speak a word that is your word alone, and yet the story is so told, the word so spoken, that they mean also the supernal things and transcend the glory of the ego able to explain itself to others." Bloom's quote is remarkable for its precision considering the often highly technical density of Bloom's prose.<sup>83</sup> Bloom goes on to explain how Collins, Keats, Coleridge, Blake, Wordsworth, et al. obtain the formal ability to tell a story "so told" that it transcends particularity and glimpses universal expression.<sup>84</sup> In part, Schneemann's response to Brakhage's in *Fuses* assails the Romantic ideology Bloom describes in this passage.

For Schneemann and other Second-Wave Feminists, Romanticism asserts the Artist/Poet as the bearer of a superior vision who sees it their duty to defend a canon of great art against the corruption of Modern society, with all the progressive ideals of equality that seek to undermine the Artists' position in the hierarchy of vision.<sup>85</sup> As these terms suggest, Schneemann's critique of Brakhage is, in part, an art historical one. Less obvious than the sense that Brakhage was complicit in efforts to sanction patriarchal

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<sup>82</sup> Though her lifelong insistence on only being a painter does not help her inclusion in film histories, particularly early on and of-the-moment accounts like Sitney's.

<sup>83</sup> Nannette Altevors. "The Revisionary Company: Harold Bloom's 'Last Romanticism'". *New Literary History* Vol. 23, No. 2. (1992) 361-382. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469241>. (accessed May 1, 2017).

<sup>84</sup> Harold Bloom. *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. Cornell, 1971. 7.

<sup>85</sup> James, David. "The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson." *Film Quarterly* 35:3 (1982): 35 – 43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211925>. (accessed July 12, 2017).

canons, Schneeman's personal relationship with the Brakhages animates the competing modes of performance that enliven both artists' legends.<sup>86</sup> The sense that Brakhage could not fathom, let alone appreciate Schneemann's conception of performance— the only performance he witnessed was not until circa 1977— mirrors the concomitant institutional position of the American university system, which was enfranchising the more covert, hermetic, ultimately mythological performances of males in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau.<sup>87</sup> The scholarship on Schneemann and Brakhage's relationship points toward areas for future scholarly inquiries into the complex interpersonal dynamics involved in Brakhage's career. Advocates like Sally Dixon, Cecille Starr, and UC-Boulder's Virgil Grillo, in addition to friends like Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, Ernie Gehr, and Phil Solomon, all merit further critical investigation and historical documentation. Conducting the research required by such a task would demand archival research at various personal collections and Anthology Film Archives, along with further investigation in the *Brakhage Collection*.

Sally Dixon helped Brakhage through her position at Carnegie Institute to gain permission to film in a police patrol, a hospital, and a morgue in Pittsburgh, PA. Brakhage's Pittsburgh Trilogy— *eyes*, *Deus Ex*, and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1970-71), represent a substantial shift from Brakhage's inwardly-focused cosmology established in his previous films. In Brakhage's most significant film from the previous decade, *Dog Star Man* (1961-64), he films himself in the role of the protagonist who, ascending a mountain, is superimposed onto cosmic and microcosmic imagery Brakhage received from astronomers at CU-Boulder. Unlike *Dog Star Man* and Brakhage's formal placement of himself as the center of a universe, for each film of his Pittsburgh Trilogy, Brakhage's camera looks outward at society in ways Brakhage had avoided until then.<sup>88</sup> In *eyes*, Brakhage rode along with police and filmed their

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<sup>86</sup> See Michael Zryd for his discussion of institutionalization and canon formation.

<sup>87</sup> See letter, SB to CS September 19 1977. Box 31, Folder 16, The Stan Brakhage Collection 1933-2003, Norlin Library Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder.

<sup>88</sup> Some scholars might note *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* as Brakhage's first outwardly focused film, because of its views of television war footage. The film remains focused on the Brakhage household and contemplates TV's role in bringing the war into the living room, similar to Brakhage's other domestic dramas.

encounters; in *Deus Ex*, he filmed inside a hospital; in *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, Brakhage filmed inside a morgue during an autopsy. Exploring universal themes like power, mortality, and embodiment, Brakhage's institutional documentaries have been described by scholars as some of the most significant divergences from his prior works.<sup>89</sup> One of the significant formal differences between Brakhage's Pittsburgh Trilogy and his other films is his use of a relatively objective camera—it is clear that the subject of *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* is a dissected cadaver despite the film's rapid editing, scratched and manipulated filmstrip, and extreme close-ups. While scholars consider these films for their formal and thematic divergences, the historical narrative surrounding these films' creation is incomplete and will require further research, which could indicate how Sally Dixon became an advocate for avant-garde artists and facilitated works like Brakhage's Pittsburgh Trilogy.

Brakhage's correspondences with Sally Dixon suggest that she helped Brakhage receive the necessary permissions from county officials to film inside their institutions. Dixon was a curator for the Carnegie Museum of Art's film program in Pittsburgh, where Brakhage was sometimes paid for his appearances.<sup>90</sup> It is unclear how Dixon first came into contact with Brakhage, although she probably became familiar with the filmmaker through publications like *Film Culture*, *Village Voice*, and the film catalogs of the NY Filmmakers' Co-Op. Brakhage stayed connected to Amos Vogel and Jonas Mekas, among other influential people in New York, not only for their access to the latest films but also resources. Although sometimes treated as a potential danger, foundations and museums in New York provided grants and fellowships to artists. In order to attain these crucial funds, artists had to maintain working relationships with people like Sally Dixon at Carnegie, A. A. Heckman at the Avon Foundation, and Cecille Starr at Anthology Film Archives.

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<sup>89</sup> See Marie Nesthus. "The 'Document' Correspondence of Stan Brakhage." *Chicago Review* 47/48 (2001): 133-156; Paul Arthur. "Qualities of Light." *Film Comment* 31 (1995): 68; Fred Camper. "Brakhage's Contradictions." *Chicago Review* 47/48 (2001): 69-96.

<sup>90</sup> Sally Dixon to Stan Brakhage. February 13, 1970. JSB COLL Box 11 fd 17

Earning these grants required artists to attain some measure of publicity in the New York art world. The main figures whose articles publicized avant-garde work were Parker Tyler, Amos Vogel, P. Adams Sitney, and Jonas Mekas. This group received criticism from the likes of Andrew Sarris and Annette Michelson for their dogmatic defenses of avant-garde filmmakers. One example from the *Brakhage Collection*, in particular, suggests Brakhage assumed that Parker Tyler would write a positive review for a film he had not yet seen.<sup>91</sup> Of course, to have these positive reviews published, filmmakers had to release films, and Brakhage released significantly more films than any other avant-garde filmmaker did.<sup>92</sup> From his inclusion in early surveys by Parker Tyler and essays by P. Adams Sitney, Brakhage received attention in independent, New York publications from fellow members of the New York Underground. These kinds of publications generated enough interest in Brakhage's films that, in 1968-69, he received a substantial grant of \$250 per month from the Avon Foundation, for the his "contributions" to cinematic arts.<sup>93</sup> Brakhage tells Heckman about his use of the Avon grant money, saying that between December 1967 and March 1969, he had "completed 4 hours and 10 mins., approx., of film... more finished film than in the first decade of [his] making... and of a quality of visual subtlety which can only be achieved thru [*sic*] tremendous lab. expenditure."<sup>94</sup> The significance of Avon's funding is clear in Brakhage's claims that these resources enabled and accelerated his productivity, even providing avenues for new formal treatments or visual quality. Brakhage's New York contacts and the notoriety they generated on his behalf played an influential role in facilitating the institutional supports he received in his career.

Written on official Grove Press stationery in 1970, Amos Vogel's letter of recommendation for Brakhage to be hired at CU-Boulder came over a decade prior to the filmmaker's eventual hiring.<sup>95</sup> Vogel professes his "unqualified admiration and endorsement of Stan Brakhage as a teacher," which is only

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<sup>91</sup> Stan Brakhage to Amos Vogel. (JSB COLL B35 F15): July 28, 1957

<sup>92</sup> Paul Arthur. "Qualities of Light." *Film Comment* 31 (1995): 68.

<sup>93</sup> A. A. Heckman to Stan Brakhage. (JSB COLL B47 F15): May 15, 1968

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Amos Vogel to University of Colorado-Boulder, cc: Stan Brakhage. (JSB COLL B35 F15) April 14, 1970.

surprising insofar as Vogel gave this generous praise several years after his friendship and frequent contact with Brakhage ceased abruptly in 1966. Brakhage gives his account of the dispute in a letter to Vogel, but offers no apology, writing that he “understand[s] from Peter Kubelka that [Vogel is] very unhappy with [Brakhage] because of the letter to John Breckman in which [Brakhage] refuse[d] the terms offered by Lincoln Center for more appearance there, and because this letter was copied and distributed to the film-makers of the Cooperative.” Brakhage is referencing an exchange of letters between him and John Breckman, where Brakhage chastises Breckman for what he perceived to be an insulting offer to speak at the Lincoln Center without pay. Jonas Mekas published Brakhage’s rebuke of the Lincoln Center and mailed it to the filmmakers involved with the Co-Op to spread the news of this dispute. Despite this public disagreement, which essentially resulted in Brakhage and Vogel no longer speaking, Vogel’s willingness to vouch for Brakhage in his official capacity as head of Grove Press’s film division attests to his instrumental role as one of Brakhage’s advocates.

Despite Vogel’s official position and the countercultural clout of Grove Press, his recommendation did not immediately earn Brakhage recognition from University administrators.<sup>96</sup> Brakhage also had allegiances within the existing faculty of the film program at CU-Boulder. Virgil Grillo founded the film program in Boulder, and along with Don Yannacito, spent nearly a decade trying to convince University administrators to create a teaching position for Stan Brakhage. In a letter from Jane Brakhage (Wodening) to Don Yannacito, Jane announces that Brakhage is “set up for a course on Charlie Chaplin at night school (continuing education) at the Univ. of Colo. in Boulder,” although it is clear in other letters that Brakhage never considered this to be a significant position.<sup>97</sup> Yannacito did not, apparently, have any say in whether Brakhage could be hired, but would continue corresponding with Brakhage throughout the 1970s. Though it is not clear where Grillo or Yannacito met Brakhage, it was likely the result of Brakhage’s network of associations through Experimental Cinema Group in Boulder

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<sup>96</sup> Loren Glass. *Counterculture Colophon*

<sup>97</sup> Jane Brakhage to Don Yannacito (JSB COLL B37 F9): August 1973



and the limited publicity he received. Finally, in 1981, Dean of Arts and Sciences at CU-Boulder Charles Middleton approved Brakhage's fulltime teaching position.

Brakhage's comments in letters about teaching reveal an inherent conflict between academic institutions and avant-garde artists. At the same time as universities hired avant-garde artists to fulfill their mission statements' decrees of inclusivity, free expression, and experimentation, avant-garde artists were accepting positions within institutions that, on some level, they ideologically opposed.<sup>98</sup> Brakhage's fear of spending energy on teaching was a consequence of his belief that his art could not be taught because it was not reducible to some teachable skills or techniques. In a letter from Brakhage to Ernie Gehr, Brakhage described his lifestyle as a teacher and reflected on his recent hiring at CU-Boulder. Brakhage tells Gehr that it is beneficial for Gehr that he has not gotten a job in San Francisco, considering Brakhage's presently being in the "midst madness of teaching at both Sch. Art. Inst. Chi AND Univ. of Colo.", and "surviving the teaching (at BOTH schools) by not giving one damn for MORE than that [he] maintain the integrity of [his] speech without regard to the clarity [He is] mostly no more being heard than if [he] were a buzzing fly."<sup>99</sup> Here and in other such examples, Brakhage's frustration about teaching is evident, and yet his career as a lecturer of some form eventually spanned several decades. The suggestion that accepting a teaching job would damage a filmmakers' career, evident also in Brakhage's letter to Paul Sharits, belies the economic stability that such employment afforded and how that stability influenced Brakhage's filmmaking. In a letter to Carolee Schneemann, Brakhage frames the decision to teach as strictly an economic imperative—

"With all the films (over 100) I've in distribution and thru [sic] ALL those companies, I can't manage a lower class living out of it (what with replacement print costs and all): why do you

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<sup>98</sup> Sally Banes *Greenwich Village 1963: Avante-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. See also, Michael Zryd. "The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance." *Cinema Journal* 45:2 (2006): 17 – 42. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/195304>. (accessed July 12, 2017).

<sup>99</sup> Stan Brakhage to Ernie Gehr (JSB COLL B16 F18) February 4, 1978.

think I TEACH, travelling to Chi. every other week, and will continue teaching thus this next year against pain of travel?”<sup>100</sup>

With Brakhage’s average of about five films per year, the resources required to generate such an output necessitated Brakhage to seek employment at CU-Boulder, despite his clear reservations about such a commitment.<sup>101</sup> Throughout his life, Brakhage expressed regular frustration at being unable to “manage a lower class living” as a filmmaker, which caused him to question the merits of a society which does not support its great artists. The mention of print costs and lab fees is a recurring concern in Brakhage’s letters, which remind that many of his formal and technical choices were often a negotiated process between the filmmaker and his limited budget. The most obvious case of the practical limitations on formal decisions is Brakhage’s innovations in 8mm films, such as the series, *Songs* (1964-1969), when Brakhage began utilizing 8mm after his 16mm camera was stolen from his car. While scholars have discussed Brakhage’s economical use of materials in his 8mm films, or in *Mothlight*, for instance, there has not been sufficient critical attention given to the practical challenges Brakhage faced as a travelling lecturer. In addition to the practical demands of travelling, scholarship would benefit from consideration of the opportunities and relationships generated from Brakhage and other filmmakers’ demanding speaking engagements.

Although Brakhage frequently expressed frustrations about the fact that he needed to teach to support his filmmaking, there is also some indication in Brakhage’s correspondences that he relished the persona imbued by his academic credentials. Brakhage seems to exaggerate when he tells long-time friend and fellow filmmaker, Bruce Conner, in 1973, that he has little free time because Brakhage is

“teaching full time at Univ. Colo. AND doing some days teaching at local high-schools (under a govt. grant to have visiting artists in high schools) AND continuing Chicago AND also

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<sup>100</sup> Stan Brakhage to Carolee Schneemann, (JSB COLL B47 F1): August 9, 1974

<sup>101</sup> Paul Arthur. “Qualities of Light.”

scampering about in such weird places as Champaign-Urbana, Ann Arbor, Wisconsin and Buffalo... all this to pick up enough bucks so we can add a couple rooms next summer.”<sup>102</sup>

Other letters from Jane Wodening indicate that Brakhage, in 1973, was teaching night classes on Charlie Chaplin as part of CU-Boulder’s continuing education program, and his slight exaggeration here might reveal something about Brakhage’s desire to affiliate with an academic institution. This quote also suggests further areas for inquiry into Brakhage’s life as a teacher outside of Boulder. Most of Brakhage’s many lectures at the Art Institute of Chicago were recorded, but are not housed in the *Brakhage Collection*. In addition to his lectures there, Brakhage travelled widely to speak about his own films and to present work by other filmmakers. Brakhage frequently referred to these paid speaking engagements as “lec-tours” because they required so much travel.<sup>103</sup>

Other avant-garde filmmakers travelled similar schedules in order to exhibit and generate publicity for their films. Most of these public presentations took place on college campuses, where a culture of student experimentation resulted in a greater willingness to engage with experimental material than that of other audiences.<sup>104</sup> Although avant-garde artists, especially Brakhage, had conflicting views about artists teaching at universities, the persona of avant-garde filmmakers along with universities’ willingness to support experimental ideas and content generated a mutually beneficial relationship.<sup>105</sup> For the small, newly formed media studies programs throughout the country, a guest lecturer like Brakhage lent credibility and prestige to the program and also facilitated the spread of Brakhage’s work. Universities often functioned as the primary screening spaces for the films of Brakhage and other avant-gardists. In a letter from Stan Brakhage to Peter Kubelka in 1985, Brakhage relays the news that he will “be showing ‘Tortured Dust’ at Harvard.”<sup>106</sup> This example, along with the receipts of film rentals that list

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<sup>102</sup> Stan Brakhage to Bruce Conner (JSB COLL B9 F1): March 8, 1973

<sup>103</sup> Stan Brakhage to Robert Creely. (JSB COLL B9 F13) December 26, 1973

<sup>104</sup> Sally Banes. *Greenwich Village 1963: Avante-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Stan Brakhage to Peter Kubelka, (JSB COLL B21 F9

universities as the most frequent customers for avant-garde films, suggests that the avant-garde had migrated from private, informal screenings in New York and San Francisco in the early 1950s to Ivy League institutions, Modern Art museums, and other venues accustomed to the study of art. While tapping into an academic audience so narrowly with their lecture tours, Brakhage and other avant-garde filmmakers positioned their work as objects of study, which inherently lent the films prestige and bypassed the need for film festival awards and critical accolades.

Although Brakhage did, occasionally, participate in film festivals, he expressed disdain for the audiences such festivals attracted. Brakhage describes a film festival in London, where "... the so-called 'independent' film-makers dump before (an increasingly indifferent) public eyes a veritable vomit of STUDENT FILMS (whether by students or not), a boring seemingly endless hall of academia in the worst sense of the word..."<sup>107</sup> Though Brakhage mostly presented his films to college students, he expressed distrust toward academic standards in art and the culture of taste-making that exists in film festivals. At film festivals, audiences take on a critical posture toward the films, thereby asserting some power in the audience/artist dynamic. In contrast, the informal speaking arrangements on college campuses that Brakhage relied on tended to produce neophyte audiences who were subordinate to the authority of the artist.

In part because of Brakhage's frequent traveling, he functioned as a vital resource for artists who needed access to equipment or information. Brakhage's movements through the network of university and community college campuses provided him access to the resources required to produce his films. In order to know where to purchase film stock, lenses, and other materials, filmmakers needed access to phone numbers and contacts at various independent film companies, like Blackhawk Films. Filmmakers required labs for colorizing and printing their films, which was the most significant economic barrier to producing them. Once the film print was available, filmmakers then needed to license a distributor who would

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<sup>107</sup> Stan Brakhage to Peter Kubelka, (JSB COLL B21 F9): June 25, 1979.

include their films in a catalogue for sale and rental. Brakhage facilitated other artists who needed access to this network of technical and logistical support. In 1973, Hollis Frampton wrote a letter to Brakhage requesting a “list names and addresses for all 8mm sources known to [Brakhage]?”<sup>108</sup> That Frampton needed to ask for this information from Brakhage, who commentators sometimes describe as being isolated in the mountains, reveals the integral connection Brakhage had to networks of resources for filmmakers. Other requests from artists seeking contact information of filmmakers, potential employers, and foundations suggest Brakhage’s network of resources was among the most extensive of any avant-garde filmmaker at the time. Not only did Brakhage call upon this network for his own job recommendations, distribution contracts, and business negotiations; he frequently provided a channel for other filmmakers like Ernie Gehr, Paul Sharits, and Hollis Frampton.<sup>109</sup>

With Brakhage’s connections to the 1950s generation of avant-gardists like Kenneth Anger, James Broughton, and Sidney Peterson, Brakhage bridged the generations of artists whose careers began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Brakhage also worked alongside Phil Solomon at CU-Boulder and collaborated on films in the 1990s and early 2000s, up to Brakhage’s death in 2003. Brakhage collaborated with Phil Solomon on three films: *Elementary Phrases* (1994), *Concrescence* (1996), and *Seasons...* (2002). Other than Brakhage’s high school friends like James Tenney and Walter Newcomb, the films Brakhage co-directed with Phil Solomon were the most frequent collaborations in his career. The strong affinity between Brakhage and Solomon developed while each taught at CU-Boulder. Scholars have not yet sufficiently accounted for Solomon and Brakhage’s influence on each other, and even less have scholars noted the importance of CU-Boulder in facilitating their relationship. Whereas in the beginning of his career Brakhage utilized relatively underground, independent institutions and networks, increasingly after his hiring at CU-Boulder he relied on formal, academic institutions. Brakhage’s friendships with other artists, from high school until his death, had a significant influence on his films and

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<sup>108</sup> Letter from Hollis Frampton to Stan Brakhage, (JSB COLL B15 F7): June 16, 1973

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helped form the vital network of information and resources he required to make films and help other artists.

One of Brakhage's most significant relationships during this period was clearly his wife, Jane Wodening. During his marriage to Jane Wodening, Brakhage documented nearly every facet of their life in his films, from the birth of their first child in *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) to Brakhage's infidelity in *Confession* (1986). Wodening's role as collaborator and coauthor of Brakhage's autobiography is more apparent with the release of *Brakhage's Childhood*, and scholars can continue to explore her role as Brakhage's partner and, later, his archivist. While scholars like William Barr, Marjorie Keller, and Ara Osterweil consider Brakhage's formal treatment of Wodening's sexuality in his films, few researchers account for Wodening's active role in Brakhage's creative process. From managing finances and business conflicts to transcribing his autobiographical narrative and allowing her privacy to be invaded by Brakhage's camera, Wodening bore significant burdens from the Brakhage family film business. An accurate historical account of Wodening's integral role in Brakhage's career will require scholarship that, in part, researches Wodening's biography and further investigates Brakhage's writings about their relationship. Brakhage stated his views on collaboration in a letter to Cecille Starr, where he makes clear that in both his marriage and his friendships, the filmmaker drew inspiration and considered his relationships to be instrumental to his art.<sup>110</sup>

Though scholars have written about Wodening's role as a subject of Brakhage's films, other relationships with friends and artists that influenced Brakhage's films require further documentation to discover the extent of their influences. Brakhage's friendship with Paul Sharits, which from their correspondences seems to have been at least superficially amicable, requires further exploration to see, for instance, how often or whether Brakhage promoted Sharits during his frequent lecture tours. Brakhage's promotion of other artists functioned almost like contemporary micromarketing strategies by seeking out

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universities, which are disproportionally young and open-minded audiences with liberal arts backgrounds. With the help of sympathetic faculty at universities who mustered whatever meager sums for Brakhage that they could, Brakhage promoted his own image as an avant-garde artist, as well as a few of his peers whose work he admired. In nearly every case, Brakhage presented films by his closest peers or those he described as his greatest influences— Marie Menken, Kenneth Anger, and Peter Kubelka, among others.

While scholars like David James and P. Adams Sitney describe the influences of poetry on Brakhage's aesthetics, significant gaps exist in the history of Brakhage's network of friends and institutions.<sup>111</sup> Future studies will benefit from the *Brakhage Collection* archive in ways that were not available to Brakhage's contemporaries, like Sitney, though most those scholars who were writing about Brakhage during his life knew him personally. Further archival research in the private collections of Sally Dixon and Cecille Starr, as well as records contained in the *Anthology Film Archives*, will allow scholars to better account for the key advocates working in institutional capacities who helped support avant-garde artists in addition to Brakhage. As David E. James and Scott MacDonald each does in their studies of Jonas Mekas and Amos Vogel, respectively, a future study could map Brakhage's network of peers using his correspondences and records in the *Brakhage Collection*. In addition to identifying key advocates of Brakhage and other avant-gardists, such a study could reorient scholarship away from the film-as-poetry model proffered by Brakhage and deployed by Sitney, James, and others, to focus instead on Brakhage's integral, intergenerational position in the information network of the avant-garde filmmaking community. Deren, Menken, and Maas passed before seeing the institutionalization of the avant-garde filmmakers they inspired, but for filmmakers like Ernie Gehr and later Phil Solomon, Brakhage connected a new generation of avant-garde filmmakers back to its origins in the New York Underground.

Despite his position within the Academy, Brakhage continued the informal, communal spirit of the New York Underground with regular gatherings at his home in Boulder. During such gatherings,

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which Brakhage called Sunday Salons, friends watched films by either Brakhage or some other artist, and Brakhage would entertain the group with his boisterous personality and endless anecdotes. So practiced was Brakhage at public speaking, by 1981 he had his own half-hour broadcast on the University of Colorado's radio network. Though these radio broadcasts are available, the only record of Brakhage's Sunday Salons, so far, comes from Phil Solomon's video recordings.<sup>112</sup> In one of Solomon's videos from 1997, Brakhage sits as if in front of a class while he fields audience questions. Phil Solomon told the present author that he had considered writing an account of these Sunday Salons, but has yet to complete such a project. The significance of such a study would be to more fully account for Brakhage's social interactions, his dramatic performances, and the communities he formed and inhabited.

While this study focuses on Brakhage and his network, future scholarship on other, lesser-known avant-garde artists can also benefit from studies that chart the role of personal, professional, and institutional networks in supporting avant-garde artists. Literature on Brakhage is extensive if compared to his contemporaries, and although there are subjects of greater exigency in the field of avant-garde cinema, Brakhage's centrality to many significant aesthetic and ideological debates with other filmmakers, as well as his enormous body of films and their formal diversity, will likely continue to generate further scholarly investigations. Scholars of avant-garde cinema, beyond those investigating Brakhage narrowly, will benefit from the *Brakhage Collection* because of the significant influence of the people whose voices it contains.

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<sup>112</sup> <https://vimeo.com/99100572>



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